

University of Groningen

(Introduction to) A Century Later

Kuo, Ya-pei

Published in:
 Twentieth-Century China

DOI:
[10.1353/tcc.2019.0014](https://doi.org/10.1353/tcc.2019.0014)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
 Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
 2019

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Kuo, Y. (2019). (Introduction to) A Century Later: New Readings of May Fourth in Modern Chinese History. *Twentieth-Century China*, 44(2), 135-137. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tcc.2019.0014>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

University of Groningen

A Century Later:

Kuo, Ya-pei

Published in:
 Twentieth-Century China

DOI:
 [0000000000000](https://doi.org/0000000000000)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
 Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
 2019

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Kuo, Y. (Guest ed.) (2019). A Century Later: New Readings of May Fourth in Modern Chinese History. *Twentieth-Century China*, 44(2), 135-258. <https://doi.org/0000000000000>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.



PROJECT MUSE®

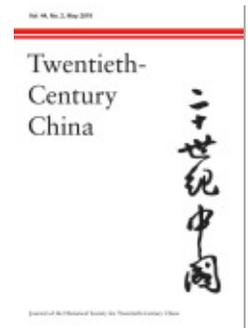
A Century Later: New Readings of May Fourth

Ya-Pei Kuo

Twentieth-Century China, Volume 44, Number 2, May 2019, pp. 135-137
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tcc.2019.0014>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/718851>

INTRODUCTION

A CENTURY LATER: NEW READINGS OF MAY FOURTH

YA-PEI KUO

University of Groningen, The Netherlands

On May 4, 1920, when students from various colleges and universities in the nation's capital gathered at Peking University for a May Fourth commemoration, they had a rather clear idea about what they were paying homage to. The organizers designed and distributed for the occasion a tricolor of yellow, white, and blue with the characters for "May Fourth commemoration" (五四紀念 *Wusi jinian*) in red on it. The three colors, it was explained, symbolized "liberty, equality, and fraternity," and the red characters the solemn dedication of Chinese youth to the tripartite motto. All enunciations at the commemoration pointed to a concrete historical event—the student-led mass demonstration that had erupted on May 4, 1919, in Beijing. The collective action taken by Chinese students and citizens formed the basis of the shared understanding of what "May Fourth" (五四 *Wusi*) referred to. And there was little ambiguity about it.¹

By the late 1950s, when Chow Tse-tung (周策縱) wrote the defining Anglophone narrative of the May Fourth movement, much of that concreteness had vanished. In his introduction, Chow stressed that the student demonstration of May 4, 1919, was only a "pivot" in a larger process. The May Fourth movement in its broader sense, according to Chow, was an "intellectual revolution" that comprised an array of new developments—the rise of "patriotic and anti-Great Power sentiments," the idea of modernization through "intellectual and social reforms," and the embrace of "Western ideas of democracy and science." Chow provided only a terse account of how the diverse intellectual elements had been integrated into one movement. As to how they had come to be associated with the student demonstration and named as such, he simply noted that the term "May Fourth movement" had "acquired a broader meaning in later years than it had originally."²

What happened to the idea of "May Fourth" between the moment of the term's emergence and the writing of its master narrative is a question that intrigues many today.

1 See Jing Guan, "Beijing tongxin: ji Beida Wusi zhounian jinian hui" [Correspondence from Beijing: report on the commemoration of the May Fourth anniversary at Peking University], *Shenbao* (Shanghai news), May 8, 1920, 7.

2 Chow Tse-Tung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 1.

No matter where this question leads one, the contrast between what May Fourth signified in 1920 and what it had come to mean by the late 1950s tells a familiar story of the evolving meaning of a historical term. That May Fourth meant one constellation of things in the years immediately after the incident and another 30 years later, in this sense, is simply logical. Different generations of history's students and different communities naturally go back to the same historical moment with distinct concerns and perspectives, and they thus offer different interpretations.

What is our take on May Fourth today, looking back a century after the event? This special issue presents a set of scholarly reflections on this question. Each of the eight contributions provides a glimpse into the current state of art of May Fourth studies. The collection starts with Q. Edward Wang's review of Chinese publications over the past three decades. The three trends that Wang identifies—individualization, localization, and memorialization—set a benchmark for assessment of the state of Anglophone scholarship. Among the three, the themes of individualization and memorialization are readily visible in the articles collected here. Both Peter Zarrow's comparative analysis of Cai Yuanpei's, Chen Duxiu's, and Hu Shi's thoughts on the place of religion and possible substitutes for it in modern Chinese life and Paul J. Bailey's essay on the work-study movement spearheaded by Francophile Li Shizeng focus on individual intellectuals. Certain aspects of Chen Duxiu's activities also receive close scrutiny in my own essay on the polemical culture of *New Youth* and in Xiaolu Ma's discussion of that journal's translation strategy. And Sofia Graziani's study of the politics of commemoration resonates with the trend of memorialization. This then seems to suggest a rather close correspondence between English- and Chinese-language scholarship.

Some contributions to the special issue, however, step outside the three trends Wang has identified, indicating a divergence. The tendency of localization is reflected only marginally in a single contribution.³ Zhao Xuduo's sociological analysis of the intellectual network that facilitated the spread of Marxism utilizes much of what is known about local cells of Marxists. Yet, rather than treating all locales as equal, Zhao's analysis highlights the hierarchical structure of the network, which shaped the roles of activists at different locations. Pushing back against the micro scale that characterizes many localization studies, the "spatial turn" here swings toward a macro scale of investigation. This interest in broad perspectives is also visible in the contributions of Bailey and Ma. Ma's focus on the translation of Western literature and Bailey's biographical focus on an individual anarchist are both typical May Fourth subjects. By globalizing these stories, however, Bailey and Ma shed light on previously unnoticed interconnections, thereby adding another layer of complexity to our understanding of the internationalism of May Fourth.

Other, more subtle, departures from the past literature in both English and Chinese are represented here. In this special issue, neither the May Fourth luminaries nor the less well-known figures, such as Li Shizeng (in Bailey), Liu Boming (in Kuo), Chen Gu (in

3 Two recent English-language books, however, have explored manifestations of May Fourth activism in the interior of China. Shakhar Rahav, *The Rise of Political Intellectuals in Modern China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) examines the career of Yun Daiying in Wuhan in the May Fourth era; Kristin Stapleton, *Fact in Fiction: 1920s China and Ba Jin's "Family"* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016) provides an overview of the May Fourth movement in Chengdu, as well as Ba Jin's depiction of it in his fiction.

Ma), Chen Gongbo and Zhang Shenfu (in Zhao), and Lufei Kui (in Andrews) are lauded for the brilliance of their thought. Rather, both the individual intellectuals and their ideas are analyzed to illuminate structural and impersonal themes in modern history—be it secularist bias against religion, Sino-French connections, patterns of polemical rhetoric, revolutionary networks, application of the principle of “science,” or the symbolic significance given to youth. The emphasis placed on these themes’ continuous presence in modern Chinese history allows us to reconnect May Fourth with the history before and after it, thereby rectifying the exaggerated sense of its uniqueness discernible in some earlier studies.

At the same time, the particularity of May Fourth remains salient. Bridie Andrews’s and Graziani’s contributions are good examples. Appeals to “science” and the adulation of youth, these authors respectively acknowledge, have been constants in modern history. Yet, their expressions in the early Republic carried a distinctive “May Fourth” imprint. As Andrews explains, the appeal to science worked in sync with the drive for popular education to catalyze the invention of the cultural product known as the modern Chinese dictionary. Similarly, Graziani demonstrates that the May Fourth conception of youth, while presaging the Guomindang’s and the Chinese Communist Party’s politically motivated discourses during and after the Second World War, set itself apart from later variations by its characteristic emphasis on autonomy. In both cases, strategic use of the *longue durée* framework effectively reconfirms the specificity of May Fourth.

We hope that this special issue serves to exemplify a number of productive approaches to May Fourth on its centenary, as well as to point to new directions in the field.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As guest editor of the special issue, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of the authors for their contributions. I am especially grateful to Kristin Stapleton, the journal editor, for her trust in me and her innovative idea of a collection of shorter essays. In addition, I thank Julia Strauss for her firm support of the project and Ling-ling Lien at Academia Sinica (Taipei, Taiwan) for her help with the conceptualization of the special issue.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Ya-pei Kuo is university lecturer of modern history at University of Groningen, the Netherlands. Her research focuses on the intellectual history of modern China.

Correspondence to: Ya-pei Kuo. Email: ya-pei.kuo@rug.nl.